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Alan L. Keyes

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Ethiopia: The UN's Role

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Ethiopian refugees in Somalia.

Following is a statement by Ambassador Alan L. Keyes, Assistant Secretary for International Organization Affairs, before the Subcommittee on African Affairs of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington, D.C., March 6, 1986.

I deeply appreciate the opportunity to come before this subcommittee to address the subject of the UN's role in responding to the situation in Ethiopia. I believe that in the past 18 months the United Nations has clearly demonstrated the important and unique contribution it can make to international efforts to relieve dire human suffering. In the fall of 1984, the Secretary General took the lead in alerting the world to the shocking magnitude of starvation in Africa. Since then, the world community has responded to the challenge with abundance of heart. The United Nations has played a crucial part in coordinating that response and in helping to assure its effectiveness.

• The Secretary General appointed a special representative to the UN's special coordinating office in Ethiopia.

• To encourage timely and sufficient donor response to the crisis, the Secretary General established the Office of Emergency Operations in Africa. That office made a major contribution to the relief effort by cutting red tape and facilitating cooperation within the UN system. It has also kept donor governments and nongovermental organizations advised of emerging needs on a timely basis.

• Within the UN system, the World Food Program's (WFP) role in logistical coordination of food shipments increased, and the WFP issued weekly bulletins on food aid deliveries to Ethiopia and the other African countries affected by the drought. The WFP is managing a truck fleet which delivers relief supplies within Ethiopia, in coordination with the Ethiopian authorities and public and private donors. WFP has done an outstanding job of handling this new responsibility without incurring significant new expense.

The UN's response to the Ethiopian famine recalls the highest aspirations of the UN Charter. I would like to salute all those—within the UN system and without, in governments, private voluntary organizations, and simply as individuals—who have given of themselves, exhausting their minds, their bodies, their grief—but never their spirit or faith, in living testament to that ideal. I would especially like to salute Kurt Jansen, who recently retired as UN Special Coordinator in Ethiopia. I would also like to note that, as Americans, we can take a special pride in the critical contribution made by a fellow American, Bradford Morse, who crowned a long career of service with his inspiring leadership of the UN's Office of Emergency Operations in Africa.

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The UN's response to the African famine reminds us once again that the best principles of the organization were themselves the fruits of mankind's determination not to abandon hope even after the experience of awesome evil, tragedy, and self-destruction in World War II. Most important, it reminds us that the UN ideal is not one that waits merely upon the will and ambitions of governments. It is one that reflects and must respond to the needs and suffering, the compassion and dignity of individual people. The United Nations cannot prevent nature's disasters; it cannot resolve all the world's conflicts or dictate the solutions for its economic or social ills—but it could work actively to assure that the victims of disaster and conflict are not abandoned, that the children of woe are not neglected, that the targets of injustice are never ignored or forgotten. It cannot be the savior, but it could be the watchful conscience of mankind.

Ethiopian Resettlement and Human Rights Abuses

It could be. But for this potential to be fully realized, the members of the organization, and particularly those who become part of its permanent secretariats, must remember that, though the United Nations is composed of governments, it must be dedicated to the service of individual people. It was not a suffering government that appealed so deeply to millions of people around the world. Rather, the mothers, children, fathers, and old men—too weak to move, reduced to silence, yet crying out with a voice heard round the world—those dying thousands and tens of thousands called forth the UN's work in Ethiopia. Their humanity was its mandate, even as it should be the mandate of the organization itself. In one fundamental aspect, however, the organization has failed to fulfill that mandate. That failure has aroused deep concern and just indignation about the UN's attitude toward the roots of Ethiopia's—and Africa's—suffering.

Since the beginning of 1984, reports coming out of Ethiopia have suggested that the Ethiopian Government's massive scheme to move 1.5 million Ethiopians from their traditional homes and resettle them in government-created villages has produced hunger, deprivation, and death. The Ethiopian Government justifies its resettlement scheme on development grounds. Critics contend that it is politically motivated, aimed at disrupting popular support for forces fighting against the communist government and concentrating populations so as to make them easier to control and coerce. Whatever the truth about resettlement, however, one cannot but be shaken and concerned by persistent reports that the implementation of this scheme has involved a widespread pattern of abuses directed against a people already burdened by the crushing weight of drought and starvation.

By November 1984, the U.S. Government had concluded from these reports that the resettlement program was woefully planned, prepared, and supported and that it involved pitiless coercion, including forced family separation and physical deprivation. We felt there was reason to believe that these abuses had resulted in thousands of deaths. That same month, we disseminated our conclusions to FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization], other international organizations, and donor governments in order to discourage a major FAO initiative intended to support the resettlement program.

Since then, reports originating both in Ethiopia and among Ethiopian refugees in Sudan have confirmed our worst fears. In interviews, all such refugees included fear of resettlement among their reasons for fleeing Ethiopia. The French-based private relief organization *Medecins sans Frontieres* (MSF) compiled a report from its volunteers working in Ethiopia. They concluded that 100,000 people have already died as a result of the resettlement program. Another organization, Cultural Survival, based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, confirmed the reports of coercion, human rights abuses, and 50,000–100,000 deaths in a systematic analysis of interviews with Ethiopian refugees in Sudan. Two former officials of the Workers Party of Ethiopia who fled to Sudan stated that coerced recruitment, forced family separations, property confiscation, and severe physical deprivation are not isolated abuses but endemic to the program. Their estimates of the death rates agree with MSF and Cultural Survival.

The Need for UN Involvement

Based on this evidence, as well as on continuing reports from our own people in the region, the U.S. Government has expressed its alarm about the continuation of the resettlement program. We have called for suspension of that effort, and donor support for it, until these reports can be verified and a system is instituted to prevent abuses in the future.

In the UN context we have sought to secure the cooperation of UN officials in pressuring the Ethiopian Government to respect the human rights and dignity of the Ethiopian people. Unfortunately, there has been reluctance in the UN system to take responsibility for addressing this problem. In adopting this posture, the United Nations has refused to challenge the reluctance of many donor governments to speak out or take action regarding the reported human rights abuses.

The U.S. Government is fully aware of the concerns and fears which give rise to this reluctance. Many donor governments and private organizations fear that drawing attention to the human rights abuses involved in the resettlement effort will confuse and erode public support in donor countries for relief efforts. They fear that if the international community puts pressure on the Ethiopian Government to suspend the program, that government will retaliate in ways that make much more difficult international efforts to assist the millions of Ethiopians who are still in dire need.

Has the Government of Ethiopia subjected its already endangered people to life-destroying abuses of their rights? If so, it may well be true that it would not hesitate to hold them hostage in response to pleas that it cease such abuses. But does this mean that the international community should avert its gaze, allowing its well-intentioned aid to become the instrument and excuse for this massive, deliberate hostage-taking? Must the world accept the grisly alternatives of letting the people of Ethiopia die from starvation and disease or else remaining silent while their government shatters and destroys the lives we have worked desperately to save?

The U.S. Government has acted in the belief that the best escape from this awful dilemma lies precisely in overcoming the paralyzing silence it creates. We believe that the UN system can play a major role in that effort—if its officials and member states can find the wisdom and courage to pursue it. At this moment, the UN Human Rights Commission is in annual session in Geneva. The United States is seeking to obtain passage of a resolution that would establish some means of verifying and monitoring the human rights situation in Ethiopia in light of the persistent reports of abuses connected with the resettlement program. Despite the fears I have outlined above, we challenge our fellow member states to support this resolution.

Some states claim that they lack concrete information about the situation in Ethiopia. But, precisely because we do not know that the reports are true, we should establish a mechanism to in-

vestigate them. Because we are not sure that the abuses have occurred on so massive a scale, we should take steps to prevent them from becoming more massive still. Because we may be suspected of political bias, must we risk complicity in moral atrocity?

Avoiding Political and Racial Bias

I believe that the United Nations, and especially the UN Human Rights Commission, was conceived precisely in order to help the world community to deal with such dilemmas as this. Precisely because action by particular states may be suspect, we have sought to create institutions through which conscience may act without suspicion of particular bias. Unfortunately, until very recently, it was clear that these institutions were themselves infected with political bias, easily taking action against states identified with the West but unwilling even to whisper against offenders identified with the Soviet Union or against the forces of terror and radicalism in the developing world. In recent years, with the passage of resolutions establishing monitoring mechanisms for Poland, Afghanistan, and Iran, we have seen some correction of this bias. However, the Ethiopian situation represents an especially critical challenge because the UN system has yet to prove that the universality of its declarations of human rights is not to be amended for reason of race or color.

Such a statement may seem strange, given that condemnations of apartheid, racism, and racial discrimination are commonplace in UN statements and resolutions. Such a record would suffice if respect for human rights, human freedom, and the human capacity for self-government required only that we sympathize with those who are victims of racial oppression. However, such respect demands not only that victims be defended no matter what their race—it also demands that governments be held accountable no matter what color their leaders may be. Those who condemn the white government of South Africa for its injustice against blacks but who do not even wish to verify the injustices that may be perpetrated by Ethiopia's Government against its people obviously imply that a higher standard of human rights is to be applied to whites than to peoples of other races or colors. We reject this implication. If it is racist not to care when black people are denied their rights, then it is racist not to care when black governments deny them.

Those who excuse the actions of the Ethiopian Government because the country is undeveloped and the people poor, uneducated, or unfed, also imply by their excuses that the poor, the uneducated, and the unfed must also be unfree. We reject this implication, too. As a government which stands by the universal creed of our Declaration of Independence, as human beings who respect the universal scope of the UN's Declaration of Human Rights, we believe that rich or poor, black or white, ignorant or learned, skilled or untrained or unfed—human beings *as such* deserve their human dignity, and all are entitled to be free. This means, of course, that governments everywhere, whether white or black or red, must be held to a standard which respects the rights and dignity of their citizens, no matter how trapped or powerless those citizens may be.

The preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights clearly summarizes the spirit that should guide the United Nations in these matters:

> . . . the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom. . . .

Obviously, the United Nations cannot be concerned with only the physical survival of the individuals it is pledged to serve. Its concern should be not only with whether people are fed but with whether they are free. ■

Alan Lee Keyes was born in New York City on August 7, 1950. He received his A.B. from Harvard College in 1972. From 1974 to 1978 he was a Teaching Fellow at Harvard, and in 1979 he received his Ph.D. in Government from Harvard University.

Ambassador Keyes joined the U.S. Foreign Service in 1978 and has served as vice consul at the U.S. Consultate General in Bombay; as desk officer in the Office of Southern African Affairs; and as a member of the Policy Planning Staff.

In 1983 he resigned from the Foreign Service to accept a position as consultant to the National Security Council. Later the same year, he was appointed U.S. Representative to the UN Economic and Social Council, with the rank of Ambassador, representing the United States at the UN General Assembly and at numerous international meetings and conferences. In 1984 he served as Deputy Chairman of the U.S. delegation to the World Population Conference in Mexico City, and he was a member of the U.S. delegation to the 1985 Women's Conference in Nairobi.

Ambassador Keyes was sworn in as Assistant Secretary for International Organization Affairs on November 13, 1985.

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